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Big-Band Music Without the Weight of Nostalgia

By BEN RATLIFF

You have to work a little at understanding Thad Jones, the trumpeter and composer. He arrived in New York in 1954, a decade after bebop exploded. He spent nine years playing and arranging with the Count Basie band, and made some lovely but generally overlooked small-group records under his own name. In the mid-1960's, when so much jazz was open-ended, small-group expressionism, he directed all his energies toward an immaculately sculptured big band.

Big-band music was well over by then, and this was not music for kids. Jones was in his 40's when the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis orchestra began. (Its repertory is still played weekly by the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.) It was built mostly of skilled studio musicians about his age, not young, freelancing upstarts. It played hot and curious music, but pop culture gave it a different association. Since it evolved from Basie, it carried a whiff of shiny 50's entertainment: many listeners today might associate the Basie-band swing phrasing

There will be another performance of "Swinging Music of Thad Jones," featuring the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, at Rose Theater, Frederick P. Rose Hall, 60th Street and Broadway, tonight; (212) 721-6500. At Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, also in Rose Hall, Joe Lovano's quartet, with Mulgrew Miller, George Mraz and Paul Motian, plays the music of Thad Jones tonight and tomorrow night; (212) 258-9595.



Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

Carlos Henriquez on bass and Vincent Gardner on trombone performing with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra at Rose Theater.

with the "Tonight" show bandleaders Skitch Henderson and Doc Severinsen.

There is a certain listener out there, including most people under 45, to whom bebop may sound like the real thing, but to whom a lot of the Jones-Lewis band's music sounds like something big and weighty from an earlier era. There is a revision to be done: it is the historian's job, the concert producer's job, the modern musician's job, to show how earthy and vital Jones's music really was. Jazz at Lincoln Center is working hard at it this week, with a little Thad Jones festival both in Rose Theater, its big theater, and at Dizzy's, its nightclub.

At the theater on Thursday, the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra

played a Thad Jones concert, led by Vincent Gardner, one of its trombonists. The program, "Swinging Music of Thad Jones," was separated into small-group Jones in the first half and big-band Jones in the second, which prevailed.

A shrunken version of the orchestra — six- and seven-piece configurations — played late-50's Jones works: witty meditations on bop, elegant blues and a lot of arranged counterpoint. The pieces included "Let's," with the staccato trick endings of its theme; "Tip Toe," which sounds a little like Charlie Parker's "Moose the Mooche," with half its notes excised and cut down to half the tempo; and "Subtle Rebuttal," a Ping-Pong of reeds against brass.

That music was highly functional,

Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra Rose Theater

but for the big-band half, the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra made Jones's music sound written for it. This season the orchestra hasn't had a regular pianist; various musicians have filled the role, and it was Marc Cary's turn on Thursday night. He went a long way toward giving Jones's music a driving, wild bounce.

"The Deacon" featured a guest soloist: the alto saxophonist Jerry Dodgion, a member of the original Jones-Lewis orchestra. He played a lovely, drawling opening blues solo over the heavy pulse of Carlos Henriquez's walking bass lines, the drummer Herlin Riley's easy groove, and Mr. Cary's juddering, emphatic chords. Short interjections from the brass section gave the piece more durability. And in the middle of the tune, Ron Westray, the trombonist, showed that this is a soloist's music, too: he played five choruses that kept building, with the band thickening up its atmosphere a little bit on each round.

"Once Around," too, sounded potent and harmonically modern, with a strong, dark tenor saxophone solo from Billy Harper, another guest who was once in the Jones-Lewis band. "Mornin' Reverend" was propelled by a bass-and-drum rhythm figure; with Wynton Marsalis and Mr. Gardner trading trumpet and trombone quips, and Mr. Gardner finally getting off an extended solo, the tune was full of hard groove, and groove erases nostalgia.